

The family and its mission; one month and counting

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By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

This week's column is adapted from Archbishop Chaput's comments at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary "Cardinal's Forum," Tuesday evening, Aug. 25.

Let me start with a story. A married couple who are friends of mine attended Mass this past weekend in a nearby diocese. The celebrant was a missionary priest visiting from Latin America. And the Second Reading was Ephesians 5:21-32: "*Wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her, to sanctify her.*"

You can guess where this is going. Before the lector could speak, the priest publicly interrupted her and explained that this was an obsolete passage; it should be ignored by the modern listener; and "no one should be subordinate to anyone else."

Now, we can understand why a missionary might feel the need to do that. Male machismo in some Latin countries, and elsewhere, can be ugly and even violent. But the right response to that sin isn't editing the Word of God, but instead preaching it fully and teaching it properly. The passage from Ephesians is *absolutely central* to understanding the Christian family.

The nature of a healthy Christian family is *shared* leadership and *mutual* subordination — but the buck has to stop somewhere, and in the Gospel, the ultimate responsibility for protecting and sustaining a family falls first on the man. And it's not a license for male power, but a call to self-sacrifice and obedience to the needs of wife and children. A Christian marriage involves equality of dignity for the spouses, but difference in roles. We are *not* autonomous selves. God made us — beautifully — to need each other.

This poses a problem. And the reason is simple: Our country is the child of a mixed marriage — biblical religion and Enlightenment ideals. We're a liberal society in the tradition of European thinkers like John Locke. Liberal democracy assumes the sovereignty of the individual. In a liberal society, freedom is defined by the individual's maximum power



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to choose whatever he or she wants, and the individual's maximum liberty *from* any burden that gets in the way of those choices. History, tradition, Churches and families impose duties on the individual. They limit the person's freedom of action. So in a liberal culture, they can easily be cast as enemies of self-fulfillment and liberty.

But again, Americans are the product of a mixed marriage. For most of our history, biblical morality and a heavily Christian population restrained the impulse to extreme individualism. And this worked pretty well, as long as people believed and actually practiced their religious faith.

Christianity is essentially *communitarian*. It's about *us as God's people* first — *our* shared well-being and *our* common good — and it's about you and me as individuals second. As religious practice has dropped, two things have happened: The cult of the self has grown, and so has the power of the state. That sounds like a contradiction, but it's not. Competing individuals need to be protected from each other. As mediating institutions like Churches and families decline, the state expands to fill the gaps. And because individuals are isolated and weak against the power of the state, the real freedom of a society also declines.

Those words “mediating institutions” need an explanation. Mediating institutions are groups of individuals bound together by shared beliefs, purposes, experiences or history, or all of these things at the same time. And they mediate in two key ways. *First*, they stand as a source of strength — a kind of shield and common voice — between the individual and the state. *Second*, they “mediate” or communicate meaning within the group.

A family gives the individual a history and a future. It makes him part of larger story. It teaches him right and wrong, how to respect and cooperate with others, what to live for and what to die for. It binds people together with two very strong adhesives: blood and love. And it does all of this as an expression of humanity's inherent nature, *preceding and independent of the state*. Which is why certain kinds of states and social engineers so deeply resent the traditional family, usually in the name of “progress” or “equality.”

When we talk about the Church as a mediating institution in society, we're really talking about the Church as a community (or gathering or *ecclesia*) of families, who themselves are domestic churches. The family is the seed of the Church.

In a mother and father, we have an echo of God's fertility and creative power. The male/female sexual difference in marriage is not incidental, and nothing can replace or duplicate it. Husband and wife become one in a way no other relationship can approximate. Their unity of flesh is essential and complementary. It confirms the “wholeness” of human experience and identity.

In mother, father and child, we find the sign of God's own nature — a community of love; three in one; distinct persons within a unity. And it's in the domestic church that the baptized *individual* learns his place in the larger story of *God's people*, learns who God is, learns his responsibility to others, and matures into a disciple and missionary. Strong, prayerful families make a strong, zealous Church. Weak families do the opposite.

The catechesis for the 2015 World Meeting of Families — [Love Is Our Mission](#) — says all of this very well, and with a lot more depth than we can go into here. If you haven't read it yet, the text is really a treasure. It's a great way to prepare for the family congress and the visit of the Holy Father.

Finally, it's worth noting that exactly four months from today is Christmas. I mention that for two reasons. *First*, there's no finer model of Christian family life than the Gospel accounts of the Holy Family. And *second*, nowhere in Scripture do we find Mary, Joseph or Jesus worrying about security, transportation or logistics.

Somehow, Mary and Joseph managed to make their way to Bethlehem and have a baby in a stable. Somehow, they managed to find the adolescent Jesus in the Temple. And somehow, Jesus managed to preach the Gospel all over Judea despite robbers, brigands and demons — and without downtown parking or even a SEPTA pass.

What's the lesson? Philadelphians have a reputation for durability. We earned it. We're nothing if not determined and

resilient. If God could send his son to save us with his suffering and love, then surely we can bear a little inconvenience to greet the pastor who guides God's Church on earth. The World Meeting of Families is a gift – a pure gift. It's a moment of grace for all of us. And we need to be there, *all of us*, to share in it, and to let God renew the spirit of our city and our Church.

Pope Francis is coming; we're down to the final month and counting. Let's welcome him together in Center City.

"*Love Is Our Mission: The Family Fully Alive*," is [available for purchase](#) from Our Sunday Visitor.

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